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The Authenticity of the Epic of Sundiata: Stopping the Single Story

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The Authenticity of the *Epic of Sundiata*: Stopping the Single Story

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ENG 380 Medieval

Abstract

Chimamanda Adichie’s TED talk “The Danger of the Single Story” highlights how sometimes society sees and hears “different versions of [a] single story” which promotes an incomplete view of a group of people or place. For instance, a popular 1994 Disney movie, *The Lion King* is a good example of this. Majority of Americans know or have seen the movie, but very few know about *The Epic of Sundiata*. The similarities *The Lion King* has to *Sundiata* are too close to ignore that the movie might have been inspired by the epic. *Sundiata* is a 13th-century African story passed down by griots, oral historians. It covers the life of Sundiata Keita, the founder of the Mali Empire. Currently, the epic is being taught in African schools as part of their history. So, why is the *Epic of Sundiata* acceptable for a film in America, whereas the literature is not taught in many of the K-12 schools? In a BBC article, it stated, “Western historians had lamented the lack of written records in some African countries and had used this as a reason to legitimise such neglect.” However, *Sundiata* has been found translated in Arabic in 1890 and available in English since 1965. When reading Western literature, references to Africa is overwhelming single-sided and told from the colonizers of Africa. Academia is reflecting on decolonizing the curriculum in order to close this gap of the single story. As a future teacher, I want to present literature that shows a whole picture and not reflect only one story. As Edward Said stated, “Our role is to widen the field of discussion, not to set limits in accord with the prevailing authority” (Said xxiii). My goal as a teacher is to widen my student’s thoughts and not aid in their limitations.

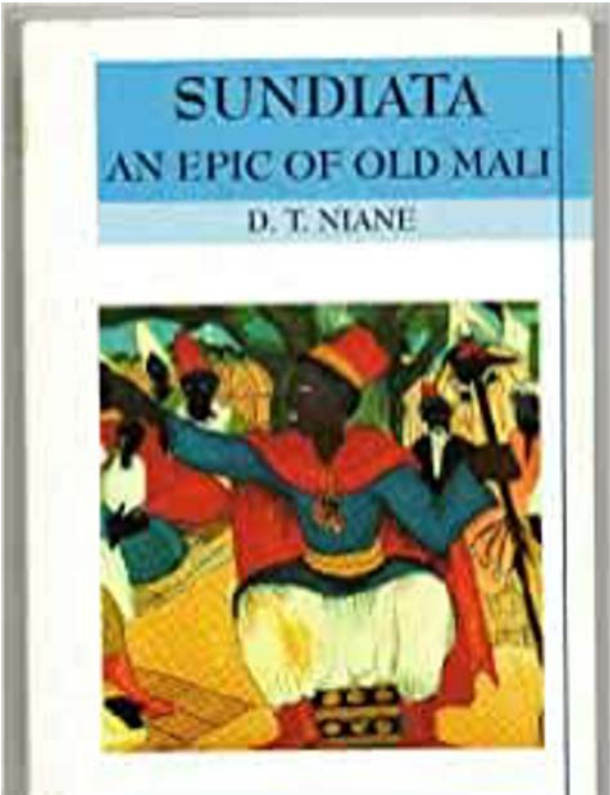
Introduction



Chimamanda Adichie talks about how dangerous it is to contain only part of the story of a group of people because it robs people of their dignity and undermines equal humanity. Another known author, Chinua Achebe, agrees when he says there needs to be “a balance of stories” (Adichie).

There are many African narratives that are told in America. For instance, *The Lion King*, *Tarzan*, *Prince of Egypt*, *The Jungle Book*, *The Heart of Darkness*, *The Gods Must Be Crazy*, and *The Blood Diamond*, etc. All of these in which are made by and for a Western audience. All perpetuating a single story of Africa.

However, there has been a shift and movements have started to decolonize the curriculum. Ultimately, promoting the teachings and views of African stories. Presented by Africans for Africans. *The Epic of Sundiata* is an example to show the obstacles a teacher may face in teaching this epic in American schools.



Epic of Sundiata

The *Epic of Sundiata* is an oral epic in Africa telling the story of Sundiata Keita. The griot, Djeli Mamoudou Kouyaté, told D.T. Niane the story and he worked with G.D. Pickett to translate it into English. Sundiata is the founder of Mali from 1235-55. He was well loved and to this day he is still celebrated. The story gives an overview of the prophecy of his reign, struggles with coming to power, obstacles, becoming the king, and establish laws for Mali. Overall, showing the union of twelve kingdoms to become the Mali Empire.

Methodology

What would it take to teach the *Epic of Sundiata* in a high school class in America?

Identifying the obstacles:

1. Understanding the authenticity of the oral epic.
2. Students are “unfamiliar” with African customs and may need “careful removal of several layers of misinformation” (Hale).
3. Researchers and Academia are currently restructuring the Epic definition (Jensen).
4. What are some possible wording of colonization in supplemental teachings?

Overcoming the obstacles:

1. The role of griots in Africa. (See a performance with translation) Griot is a word that Americans are not familiar with. They are more than story-tellers. It is their sole job to pass on the history and it their learning never stops.
2. Provide students with scaffolding with literature like *Things That Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe.
3. Keep up with the academia field to see how the term “epic” is being defined.
4. Be aware of words like “better” “different,” “other,” and other words that Edward Said discusses that create a dialogue of inferiority and superiority.



Griots performing in Mali (Britannica)

Authenticity



Adichie asked, What does it mean to be “authentic?” when her professor said her story was not “authentic African story” (Adichie)? Today terms to analyze yesterday’s work According to the Oxford English Dictionary, “authentic” is to either be :

- Fact or being real
- “A mode of existence arising from self-awareness”,
- “The quality or fact of accurately reflecting a model or exemplar, or of being traditionally produced or presented.”

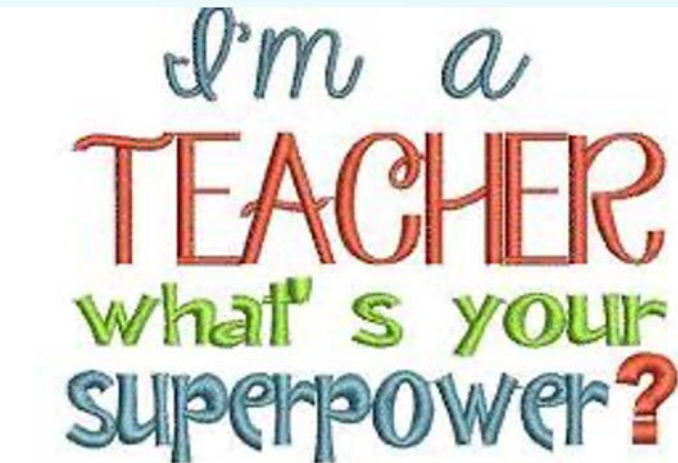
These definitions can pertain to the *Epic of Sundiata*. While the epic is not written, it is practiced by professionals and serves a purpose for a group of people to be aware of their history.

Conclusion

Teaching *The Epic of Sundiata*, in high school in America can prove to be a difficult task. However, looking at the obstacles and how to overcome not only builds skills for the students, but can build skills as a teacher. Meanwhile, making the world a better place where people can understand others and their culture.

Overall, it would be worth the effort to teach *Epic of Sundiata*.

In the words of Mahatma Gandhi,
“Be the change you want to see in the world.”



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